



14 February 2012

The Honorable Bert Stedman, Co-Chair
The Honorable Lyman Hoffman, Co-Chair
Senate Finance Committee
State Capitol, Rm. 516 and 518
Juneau, AK 99801-1182

RE: SB 130, An Act establishing the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council and relating to the preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native languages

Dear Senators Stedman and Hoffman:

I appreciate this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 130, "An Act establishing the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council and relating to the Preservation, Restoration, and Revitalization of Alaska Native languages." I would also like to commend you in this noble effort to support the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of this State.

I am Byron Mallott, a member of the Sealaska Corporation Board of Directors, and former President and CEO of First Alaskans Institute. My Tlingit names are Dux da neik and K'oo del ta'. I am the clan leader of the Kwáashkl Kwáan (Humpback Salmon) clan, Fort House from Dry Bay, near Yakutat.

Before I state my reasons for supporting SB 130, it is important to briefly outline the status of Alaska Native languages today. Unless remedial action is initiated, most all of Alaska Native languages will join their already extinct linguistic relative, the Eyak, within a few short decades. A UNESCO report on endangered languages classifies native languages as "vulnerable", definitely endangered, severely endangered, critically endangered and extinct. In our state, the Yup'ik language is the healthiest, yet is still "vulnerable", meaning children still speak the language but in limited domains (home). The Inupiaq language spoken in the North Slope and Kotzebue and the Gwich'in

Athabaskan languages are “severely endangered,” meaning that the languages are spoken by grandparents and older generations. While the parent generations may understand Inupiaq and Gwich’in Athabaskan, they do not generally speak these languages to children or among themselves. Aleut, Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian languages are “critically endangered” meaning that the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently. This state has lost the Eyak language, which is now extinct.

The State of Alaska can stop this rapid progress towards language extinction by passing SB 130 “An Act establishing the Alaska Native Language Preservation and Advisory Council and relating to the Preservation, Restoration, and Revitalization of Alaska Native languages.” This is a historic and symbolic bill. For the first time, the highest office in our state is acknowledging the value of linguistic diversity. This is progress. We have moved from a time when our people had their mouths washed out with soap for speaking their language to a time when the Governor of our state will have an Advisory Council on Native Languages.

The Council won’t solve all of our problems. There is much work to do. That work must be in language restoration. Languages that are severely and critically endangered must teach and nurture language learners so that they can teach the language to others. Sealaska Heritage Institute recently surveyed language teachers/learners in Southeast communities. When asked how long they had been learning and how long they had been teaching, the difference was very little, sometimes only one semester. Our language learners/teachers need support at all levels. Native language curricula and Native Language teachers are critical for language revitalization.

The heart of the Council’s work will be to “advise the governor and the legislature on programs, policies, and projects for cost effective preservation, restoration, and revitalization of Alaska Native languages in the state.” This work together with the necessary funding can ensure that one of our most significant resources in the state survives. The Council must formulate policies that support the revitalization of Native languages and identify barriers that threaten the survival of Native language. Significantly, one of the most immediate effects of the legislation is that it would serve to reverse the perception that the State of Alaska is adverse to linguistic diversity. It would further send a powerful message that Alaska sees indigenous languages as a part of its heritage to be protected.

Language is a uniquely human gift, central to our experience of being human and Alaska Native. Our cultural identity and traditional knowledge are embodied within our language. This knowledge and the differing world views are worthy of protection and transmittal to future generations. An example of worldview in the Tlingit language is kinship terms. In addition to terms for

mother, father and grandparent, Tlingit kinship terms denote clan relationships. Aunts and uncles are either the same clan as a child or the opposite clan—their titles tell him so. Siblings are differentiated by gender and age. Clans have clan in-laws—the opposite moiety who they traditionally married. All these very complex relationships are carried in kinship terms. Part of knowing who we are, which is critical for healthy development, is knowing who we are related to and how. All this is carried in language. Linguistic and cultural diversity is a benefit to society.

We are not going to save our indigenous languages through culture week, or guest lectures on language. Our state needs all of us to say this is a priority, advise the Governor and administration on systemic efforts that are most effective. Each of our language groups is working on language revitalization. Let's look at what is most effective for which groups. Even the Yup'ik, who have the healthiest of our Native languages, are vulnerable. A systemic approach will identify the needs of each language community and advise on what is needed to move that language one level safer.

Sincerely,

Byron Mallot
Sealaska Corporation
Board of Directors